DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 143 CG 019 910

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TITLE Finishing Unfinished Business: A Study of Reactions to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (Arlington, VA, April 9-12, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adults; *Emotional Experience; *Emotional Response; *Mental Health; *Psychological Characteristics; *Sex Differences; Social Influences; *War
IDENTIFIERS *Vietnam Veterans Memorial

ABSTRACT

A situation in which an individual harbors intense, unexpressed feelings is referred to as "unfinished business." Several schools of psychotherapy suggest that an individual must find closure for important unfinished events in one's past in order to experience life fully. Because observations of the behavior of individuals at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (VVM) suggests that people visit the memorial to complete their unfinished business, the tendency of individuals to seek closure was evaluated at the VVM. Questionnaires designed to evaluate the emotional effects of a visit to the VVM and the healing expected to result from the visit were completed by 39 adult (22 female, 17 male) visitors to the VVM. The results revealed that the strongest emotion experienced was sadness, and that males reported more fear and guilt than did females. Males also spent more time at the VVM than did females. Most subjects described their visit as a healing experience. These results support the association between strong emotional reactions and healing, and suggest that individuals seek the experiences needed to finish unfinished business. (NB)

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FINISHING UNFINISHED BUSINESS

A STUDY OF REACTIONS TO THE VIETNAM VETERANS' MEMORIAL

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CG 019910

Presented at Eastern Psychological Association; April, 1987; Arlington.

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Abstract

A situation in which an individual harbors intense, unexpressed feelings is referred to as "unfinished business." The tendency of individuals to seek closure was evaluated at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (VVM). The strongest emotion experienced was sadness, and males reported more fear and guilt than females. Males also spent more time at the VVM. Most subjects described their visit as a healing experience. These results support the association between strong emotional reactions and healing, and suggest that individuals seek events to finish unfinished business.

FINISHING UNFINISHED BUSINESS

A STUDY OF REACTIONS TO THE VIETNAM VETERANS' MEMORIAL

Several schools of psychotherapy (Gestalt, psychodrama) subscribe to the idea that one must find closure for important unfinished events in one's past in order to experience life fully. "Unfinished business includes emotions, events, memories, which linger unexpressed in the organismic person" (Cohn, 1970, p. 136). A set of techniques (which often include re-enactment of a significant event) have developed to enable the individual to attain the necessary closure of the experience (Starr, 1977). Especially when a relationship ends through death, a survivor may need to address old unfinished business, and finally say goodbye to the loved one (Kaminski, 1981; Tobin, 1971). In the process, strong emotions are often experienced and expressed. While the empirical evidence in support of the efficacy of these techniques is limited to the case reports cited above, many clinicians accept them as valuable adjuncts to therapy.

Unfinished business is generally addressed in either group or individual therapy, yet one wonders if individuals seek to finish/close experiences for themselves, unaided by the structure of therapy. Instances in which individuals seek closure have been reported in other contexts (Zeignarnik effect; Hall & Lindsey, 1985). Of specific interest in this context would be the study of a natural situation which allows individuals to experience strong emotions, finish their business, and heal their wounds.

The Vietnam Veterans' Memorial (VVM) was chosen as a site which allowed these components of finishing to occur. References have been

made to the strong emotions experienced by individuals as they view the VVM (e.g., Kroy, Cunningham, & Goldsmith, 1986; Swerdlow, 1985), and behavioral components (e.g., leaving a poem, flower, or letter) have also been noted (e.g., Carman, 1986; Wheeler, 1985). Lang (1983), in fact, described the VVM as "a healing stone."

The purpose of the present study was to measure the emotional reactions involved in a visit to the VVM, and the healing expected to result from it. Because observations of the behavior of individuals at the VVM suggested that people seek out this experience to complete their unfinished business, it was chosen as the setting for the study.

METHOD

Subjects. Subjects were 100 male and female adult visitors to the VVM. While random sampling was not possible, the self-report questionnaires were distributed each day of the week, for several weeks, and at various times of the day and night. The return rate was 39%.

Procedure. Subjects were asked to complete (anonymously) and return a two page questionnaire for a study of "the emotional effects of a visit to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial." The questionnaire asked for demographic information, the amount of time spent at the VVM, the number of previous visits and anticipated future ones, and one's personal connection to the Vietnam experience. On a 1-10 scale (10 being most intense), subjects also rated the intensity of 11 emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, happiness) while viewing the VVM, and also at a later time. The effects on coping, intensity of relevant feelings, and healing were also rated.

RESULTS

One concern in this study was that a particular type of person would agree to participate, hampering the generalizability of the findings. The demographics of the sample who agreed to participate are as follows, and appear to describe a heterogeneous American population:

Sex: 22 females, 17 males

Age: 19 - 54, mean = 34

Modal education: some college (range: high school - post college)

Residence: 19 states, DC, foreign countries

Occupations: students, homemakers, blue collar workers, college professors, policemen, clerical workers.

Personal experiences: varied from none at all to having served in Vietnam.

Ratings of emotions while viewing the VVM, indicated that the strongest experience was sadness (mean = 7.33), and several other emotions were also quite intense. Sex differences were obtained on the emotions of fear ($p<.03$) and guilt ($p<.01$), such that males experienced a greater degree of each.

Later, when subjects recalled their experience at the VVM, males reported more current guilt than females ($p<.01$). Males tended to experience more negative emotions overall (while viewing and later) than females, $p<.03$. Males were more likely to have a strong personal connection to the events of Vietnam (64% of them had been there during the war; none of the females had), and they spent more time than females at the VVM vs. 35 minutes, $p < .05$). A majority of subjects (65%) reported that the experience was healing (to varying degrees). Healing was significantly correlated with the intensity of overall

emotion experienced (r=.38) and with coping (r=.54). Healing was unrelated to gender and to tears shed while viewing the VVM. No sex differences were obtained on self-reports of weeping, either generally, or while viewing the VVM.

CONCLUSIONS

These results lend empirical support to the popular observation that a visit to the VVM is an intense emotional experience. While previous research has suggested that females report stronger emotions than males (Allen & Haccoun, 1976), in this study strong emotions were the norm for both sexes, but males experienced more intense fear and guilt than did females.

Given the intensity of the negative emotions reported by these subjects, one wonders why they would voluntarily come to such a place. They may be drawn to this site because they feel the experience is healing even though the process may be painful. Through the strong emotional finishing of their unfinished business, they may gain a sense of closure, competence, and peace with respect to the issues that were heretofore unresolved.

Yet, some strong feelings remain, especially in males, suggesting that unfinished business may not finish automatically through one exposure -- in fact, the amount of time needed for resolution may be proportional to the intensity or difficulty of the issue. Males did spend more time than females viewing the VVM, possibly because they needed more time to close the strong reactions they had experienced.

These findings support the theoretical suggestions that "finishing" an event by experiencing the strong emotions associated with it helps to heal the wound. Intense emotional experiences while viewing the VVM were associated with healing, but the expression of

the emotion (i.e., tears) was unrelated to healing. Certain situations may facilitate this healing process, and individuals will seek the experiences needed to promote their own healing.

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